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## ABSTRACT

Lincoln Accelerated School has participated in Missouri's Accelerated Schools Project since 1990. Grounded on a school-based management model, it seeks to modify the educational experiences of at-risk elementary students by enriching the curricular offerings and instructional strategies provided them. The school underwent a major stressor when the principal who had led the school through the first year of restructuring resigned. This paper examines the impact of the resignation on the school's restructuring process and describes the efforts of Lincoln's new principal to keep the focus on the long-term goal of change. Data were obtained through document analysis, field notes, and interviews with 12 faculty on staff during the transition, 2 newcomers, and 1 teacher who transferred to another school. Teachers believe that new faculty and staff must be introduced early to the concepts of acceleration; and new principals must quickly learn and build on faculty strengths. Principals in such situations should (1) respect shared decision making and the mechanics of the alternative governance structure; (2) become an integral part of the process, including keeping the vision; and (3) respect and use well empowerment, unity of purpose, and faculty strengths. Other critical factors include the quality of the principal-teacher relationship, the principal's commitment to the instructional process, and the principal's concern for teacher and student development. Contains 17 references. (LMI)

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# **When the Keeper of the Vision Changes:** **Leadership in an Accelerated School**

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## **Introduction**

Schools which respond to the 1990's call for restructuring embark on a long term venture of self examination and transformation. A commitment to the process of change must pervade the school and be supported by the school district and, ideally, the community. The reallocation of decision-making authority from the familiar bureaucratic model to a site-base management option requires efforts that are deliberate, systemic, and risky. Participants must trust each other and believe conceptually in the ideas guiding the model they have chosen to adopt. As obstacles are confronted collaboratively and consensual decisions lead to successes, confidence in the model increases. That confidence is shaken, however, when unanticipated stressors occur.

Lincoln Accelerated School experienced such a stressor when the principal who had led them through the first year of a restructuring effort resigned. The purpose of this paper is to understand the impact of the resignation on the school's restructuring progress, to describe the efforts of Lincoln's new principal to maintain the focus on the long-term goal of change, and to offer recommendations to others assuming a leadership role in a school engaged in adopting an innovation. These purposes will be achieved relying on a conceptual framework derived from two related areas, the literature on school restructuring and the literature on the principal's role as a school leader. These literatures will be briefly reviewed prior to introducing Lincoln Accelerated School and setting the stage for this inquiry.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Two avenues characterize the school restructuring endeavors of this decade. According to Raywid (1990) and Wirth (1992) site-based management and schools of choice are the two categories into which restructuring efforts can be categorized. When models of change are selected they may

be adopted locally or systemically. Missouri's response to the present call for school reform includes a state education department initiative (Cohen, in press; Soloman, 1990) supporting implementation in elementary schools of the Accelerated Schools Project (Levin, 1988, 1991). This model is characteristic of a site-based management restructuring effort. It is not a mandated systemic initiative in Missouri. Rather, schools serving populations of "at risk" students apply to the state's department of education for inclusion in the initiative. Presently, a successful application results in access to monies supporting initial and follow-up staff development and training in the accelerated schools model and access to resources supporting the change endeavors. The procedure was not as formal, nor were the supports as stable when Lincoln joined the Missouri network as the eighth pilot site when the Missouri project began its third year.

### **Accelerated Schools**

Lincoln Accelerated School serves disadvantaged children who, in current educational terminology are described as being "at risk" of completing elementary school at or above expected levels of achievement and competence. As a result, the probability of future educational successes in middle school and high school settings declines as they fall further and further behind. Levin (1986, 1988) eloquently observes that "at risk" is not a personal attribute of a child, nor is it a characteristic over which children have control. Rather, children may be "at risk" because the communities (educational, familial, social) in which they live do not provide suitable and supportive experiences for them (Bruckerhoff, 1988; Pallas, Natriello, McDill, 1989).

A goal of the Accelerated Schools Project is to modify the educational experiences of elementary school children by enriching the curricular offerings and instructional strategies provided them. An ineffective remedial model is the traditional remedy for children who fall behind their peers.

Accelerated schools, in contrast, offer an enriched environment for learning that builds on children's academic foundations and challenges their thinking and learning in much the same way that accelerated programs for the gifted and talented involve and engage learners. The experiences provided by the changing educational environment are supported by changes in the other institutions influencing children. Family involvement in and community support of the accelerated school are fundamental to modifying the patterns of failure and remediation targeted for change.

Levin's (1988) model relies upon three foundational principles which provide both a philosophy and a process to guide restructuring. The foundational principles are: unity of purpose, empowerment with responsibility, and building on strengths. Briefly, the principles convey the importance of members of the school community being focused on a common vision as they transform the school's curricular and instructional processes to accelerate learning for all students. For this transformation to occur all constituents are not only united in their focus, but each takes responsibility to act and is respected for the strengths each brings to the change process. Problem solving, decision making, and policy implementation are the responsibility of all constituents including teachers, parents, and at times, students. Governance structures within a school are modified to support these principles.

Initially, all members of the school community meet to assess present conditions in the school. These conditions describe a baseline for the community to use as they agree on long-term (5-6 year) goals for the school and create a vision which will continuously provide a focus for goal attainment. Cadres of stakeholders (staff, teachers, parents, administrators) are formed to work collaboratively on the shorter-term priorities instrumental to reaching the long-term goals. They use an inquiry process to help them consider divergent solutions to address a priority issue and to help

them carefully research solutions before making a recommendation for action. At Lincoln the recommendation is made by the cadre to the steering committee which is composed of representatives from each cadre, the school and central administrations and the parents' association. The steering committee brings the recommendation as an agenda item to a meeting of the school-as-a-whole where the faculty and staff, and members of the community review and have an opportunity to discuss and endorse the recommendation. The governance structure provides a vehicle for the consensual decision making necessary to change local practices related to curriculum and instruction, parent involvement, school climate, and school leadership.

In an accelerated school the principal is considered the "Keeper of the Vision". As the community fashions the vision and identifies the priorities necessary to attain the vision, one of the principal's responsibilities is to maintain the focus on the long-term goal of acceleration. For each school this is the local vision, dream, or mission set by and for the children and adults affiliated with the school. The keeper of the vision advocates for the school locally and beyond the local community. The keeper of the vision is the conscience of the change effort. Keeping the vision is related to what Deal (1987) refers to as building the school culture. Deal describes the shared values, history, heroes, and rituals shared by members of the school community which school leaders must proclaim, champion, and celebrate as they maintain commitments and encourage change within the school. Sashkin and Sashkin (1993) found that visionary leadership behavior relates to culture building and to team building, concepts focal to Levin's (1988) accelerated schools model.

As the leader of an accelerated school the assumption is made that the principal has confronted and resolved the changing leadership roles acceleration requires of the office. In fact, it is often the principal who has initiated the process of becoming an accelerated school. What

happens, then, when the keeper of the vision resigns? What is the impact on the teachers, staff, children, and parents who trusted and respected the principal in his/her role as the leader of the change towards acceleration? What awaits the newly appointed principal who may or may not be interested in pursuing the previously set vision and whose leadership style may or may not be compatible with the governance structure and consensual decision making patterns operating in an accelerated school? Lincoln's case is not unique. In a decade when restructuring options characterize schools' current preoccupations and the rate of local elementary principal turnover averages 10-12% (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 1991-1992), other schools and newly appointed principals will confront the realities of the transition that Ed Packer met with Lincoln's staff.

### **School Leadership**

Research on the leadership style of the principal may be helpful in predicting how smoothly such a transition will be made. Three configurations of the principal as leader are relevant. Sashkin and Sashkin (1993) expand a distinction made by Firestone and Wilson (1985) between activities which build bureaucratic linkages, i.e. manage logistics, and these which build cultural linkages. Building cultural linkages is what Sashkin and Sashkin regard as school leadership. Consistent with Levin's recommendations their data suggests that school leadership is culturally driven, focused on instruction, and relegates a minor role to managing bureaucratic linkages. Duckworth and Carnine (1987) draw from the research on effective teaching, effective schools, and effective leadership practices in schools to describe the principal's relationship with teachers. Consistent with the concepts guiding the accelerated schools philosophy, quality relationships are based on three key premises: that teachers are teaching and children are learning, that teachers and principals work

together cooperatively and interdependently, and that the management strategies principals use to maintain a focus on instruction are multidimensional. Duckworth and Carnine describe the quality relationship from the perspectives of both teacher and principal. They insightfully identify the barriers to quality relationships and recommend strategies to overcome them. Those recommendations include processes also found in school restructuring innovations: building respect and trust by building cooperative, problem solving relationships.

Finally, Leithwood's (1990) review of principals' styles acknowledges four styles: (1) those who focus on administering the school plant or (2) those who focus exclusively on maintaining a comfortable school climate. Leithwood consolidates into the term "instructional leader" (3) those who focus on instructional programs and (4) those who focus on student development. Leithwood's premise that teacher development is the core of instructional leadership is not only consistent with the accelerated schools focus on adopting new curricular and instructional practices, but his guidelines for supporting teachers, adult learners, as they elect to develop are also consistent with Levin's philosophy. Principals engaged in leading their school communities to adopt new programs will be more successful when their styles include these characteristics of effective leadership. New principals inheriting an accelerated school from a deposed or resigned predecessor inherit an anticipated legacy of unrest and uncertainty along with the hefty challenge of maintaining a vision they did not help set.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Source**

Lincoln formal began its journey towards acceleration in the summer of 1990 when a team of teachers attended the state sponsored Accelerated Schools Academy. As the school year



commenced the first author was asked to work with the school as it set its vision. Later in the school year she was invited to work with the school as a higher education facilitator helping to implement the accelerated schools concepts. The second author was appointed Lincoln's principal in August, 1991. Thus, data was obtained by participant observers, one of whom provides an insider's focus and the other, an outsider's perspective.

In addition to relying on formal and informal documents and field notes of meetings, conversations, and events, interviews were conducted with many involved in Lincoln's efforts. Lincoln presently (1993-1994 year) has 14 classroom teachers and 12 professional support specialists. Twelve experienced the transition from the former to a new principal. Five joined the faculty as Ed Packer assumed leadership; he participated in most of those decisions to hire. Interviews for this report were conducted in 1994 by the first author with 12 faculty who were on staff as the transition occurred, two faculty who were newcomers in Packer's first year, and one teacher who transferred to another school in the district. Community information was obtained from the Mayor and City Clerk and the Chamber of Commerce President.

An interview protocol was developed to guide these conversations and probe specifically some of the questions related to the change in leadership and its impact on the acceleration process. The interview data validate, and, at times, challenge the participant observers' perspectives. As themes and conflicts emerged from the compilation of the interviews, the first author checked them against the second author's perceptions. The information obtained through informal conversations and formal interviews was not shared, except as aggregated thoughts and hypotheses, with the principal. Data were analyzed and interpreted for patterns and themes related to principal leadership, the transition process, and the implementation of the accelerated schools processes and philosophy.

### **The School Setting**

Lincoln Accelerated School is the only elementary school in Pagedale, a city of 4,158 residents situated in east-central St. Louis County. Lincoln serves 367 preschoolers through sixth graders. It is one of nine elementary schools in the Normandy School District. 98% of Lincoln's students are of Afro-American descent, 2% represent other ethnic groups. More than 90% of the students receive free or reduced lunches. 52% of them receive Chapter I services. Lincoln is a neighborhood school. All but a handful (5-10) of its students walk to school. 1990 Census Data indicates their neighborhood comprises mostly single family residences with a median property value of \$35,400. Their families earn a median annual income of \$19,985. According to Chamber of Commerce information, Pagedale is supported by 150 commercial and industrial businesses, few of which hire local residents. With the exception of small corner grocery stores, businesses do not depend on Pagedale residents. There are no retail businesses, nor is there a supermarket in the community.

When Lincoln's students walk to school, along any one street block they are likely to encounter boarded up homes, well maintained homes, homes with condemned stickers on boarded up doors and windows, and homes with debris littered yards. Two rows of transmission towers loom over the neighborhood on an east-west axis bordering the north side of the school. The towers stand alongside railroad tracks which are integral to the operation of Pagedale's three big industries. Across the tracks from Lincoln is one of these industries: the Lever Brothers St. Louis plant manufactures detergents and soaps. The factory is enormous and imposing; its huge white towers spew out smoke and residues which raise Lincoln's teachers' concerns for their health and for their students' health. Lincoln staff have been unsuccessful in their attempts to initiate conversations or relationships with

Lever Brothers. That failure would not surprise the Chamber of Commerce President who offered the unsolicited description of Lever Brothers as a low profile company which does not participate in the Chamber of Commerce, nor does it participate in the community, or hire Pagedale's residents.

### **Results: Inheriting an Accelerated School**

The results will be presented chronologically by describing Lincoln's first year of involvement with acceleration under the leadership of its outgoing principal and describing subsequent years under the leadership of its new principal. The focus will be on the impact of the outgoing principal's resignation and the transition period as Ed Packer assumed the principalship. Events relevant to the transition will be described as they impact the adoption of the accelerated schools model.

#### **The Legacy**

Lincoln joined the Missouri network of accelerated schools under the direction of a charismatic, enthusiastic principal who some staff admired as a "class act" and others idolized. She is described as a "good shepherd of the flock of teachers". She was dynamic, well spoken, and shrewd. Those who commented on her leadership style volunteered that she was not a strong instructional leader, but she was a persuasive and a knowledgeable negotiator who, at the suggestion of Central Office administrators, agreed to commit Lincoln to becoming an accelerated school. Teachers remember discussing and voting on this decision in the spring of 1990. Ambivalence characterized their reaction to the decision, but many had faith that their principal would lead them to acquire the promise and hopefulness that Hank Levin had conveyed to them in a visit. Many felt that Lincoln staff already were focused on children and they were already engaged in a process similar to acceleration. Lincoln's teachers had a reputation in the district for being strong, argumentative and cliquish. The perception was that these interpersonal problems would diminish as Lincoln

implemented acceleration.

Repeatedly, the interview data reveal how tentatively the faculty felt about this venture and how their perceptions of its promises were unrealistic. Teacher empowerment was one of those promises. Teachers looked forward to a new autonomy so that they could reduce class size, develop policy to diminish the high pupil mobility rate in the building, and arrange to use an achievement assessment instrument of their own selection (the district uses the state's mastery tests). They expected to be treated differently by the central office and to receive extra monies to spend on classroom supplies, field trips, school events, and instructional materials. These expectations were encouraged by their goal-directed principal who carefully selected a handful of her strongest faculty to participate in the state department sponsored accelerated schools academy held during the summer of 1990. The teachers were expected to be school leaders when school resumed.

As the school year began the faculty was introduced by a state department representative to the concepts and processes of acceleration. In October, two outsiders, the first author and a staff development specialist from a neighboring district, were asked to help Lincoln's faculty begin the vision setting process. In January both were invited to be facilitators. Lincoln faculty requested direction in such governance issues as organizing cadres, achieving consensus, and setting up a steering committee. Soon after, the rumor mill at Lincoln carried the news that their principal was job hunting; "she wanted out". Newcomers that year to Lincoln were shocked. Veterans were not surprised: they knew her heart was not on the job and they knew she was ambitious. The impact of this rumor and their leader's subsequent resignation was bittersweet. Feelings of being deserted and of betrayal were balanced by respect for her success at "moving out to a better district". Despite their happiness for their colleague, morale in the building was low that spring. Other resignations came

in slowly until new positions were available for a counselor and music, art, physical education, and second grade teachers. The principal was described as not present; the staff was described as "flailing around---not knowing what we were doing with accelerated schools".

Teachers jockeyed for power positions in cadres and on the steering committee. The faculty focus was on the uncertain future; who would replace the principal? How would the social order in the building be affected by all of the replacements for the resignations? What would life be like at Lincoln? The accelerated schools governance structure was operative in word, but strong voices challenged, rather than used, consensual decision making. The steering committee was intent on being represented on the district's selection committee. Fortunately, central office respected the steering committee's request and during the summer months, the parent representative and chair of the steering committee participated in interviews. During his interview, Ed Packer recalls being asked if he knew what an accelerated school was and how flexible he was. Packer was offered the job in August. Lincoln's teachers felt their voices had been heard.

### **Adopting the Vision**

Prior to his appointment at Lincoln, Ed Packer had been a Navy SEAL, a principal in a rural Alaskan community school, and an assistant principal in an elementary school in Lincoln's district. He knew the district and its community well, but had not heard much about acceleration until his interview. He was appointed after the annual accelerated schools summer academy. He learned nothing more about the program until he attended a steering committee meeting held before the school year began. He was startled by the fact that this group convened itself before the district required teachers' attendance and he was struck by the autonomy the group assumed in making decisions he understood to be the purview of the principal. He was impressed and curious since he

held traditional expectations of the principal's role: decisions, he felt, should be delegated and implemented. These initial impressions of his new staff contrasted with the bitter and negative attitudes expressed by others as the school year began. Discord was high. He had inherited the legacy of a star quality principal who had deserted her staff and taken some of them with her. This act would be tough to follow. He had inherited the legacy of a promising project which offered unrealistic and false promises to a tired faculty who did not understand its philosophy. These perceptions would be difficult to change.

Packer paid attention to the energy and ideas generated during the August steering committee meeting. He decided to listen and learn about the accelerated schools project. He notes that despite the zealousness of the teacher leaders on the steering committee, Lincoln staff still needed to "find their focus". A new governance structure was in place, but Packer believed the cadres were not strategically set up to facilitate progress towards the vision they had set for themselves the year before. The vision statement displayed throughout the building did not guide their actions. He discovered that teachers could not explain the concepts of acceleration to him. He heard much discussion, but saw no implementation. Teachers focused on adult personalities and tensions, rather than focusing on children. Packer was beginning to adopt Lincoln's vision and describes his first year as leading the staff to refocus their energies on their vision of acceleration for Lincoln's children. He was striving to achieve unity of purpose.

The teachers describe the first year of Packer's leadership similarly: there were interpersonal conflicts, they were not focused on acceleration, they didn't understand acceleration. They observed Packer struggle between being in charge and consulting with them. Sometimes, some observed the dictator in him return. He was a straight talker who wasted few words in conversation. They

recognized that he was learning, listening, and trying to adapt. One teacher identified Packer's "hallmark" that year as being flexible and asking "where and how do I fit in"? He tried to banish personality clashes from the building by decree because he recognized how destructive they could be. By October teachers recall him sending a very clear message. "This is a winning program. We're staying in it and if you can't join us, I'll help you transfer". The message was emphatic and would, gradually, be effective. Teachers recognized how Packer was trying to help them refocus. Cadres reorganized; the new principal learned to consult with the steering committee; a new chair was selected to lead the steering committee. The year of transition was rough: Packer's style and routines differed from those of his predecessor, interpersonal conflicts raged, goal directed staff were frustrated by resistant staff, newcomers wondered what acceleration truly meant. Packer's responsibility to keep the vision foremost in the thought of Lincoln's teachers, students, and children was becoming clearer and clearer.

### A Renewed Focus

The next school year began with cadres reorganized and focused realistically on priorities related to the vision. Packer's high expectations for Lincoln's teachers paralleled the high expectations he knew teachers must hold for their pupils. Packer declared his right as principal to focus on teachers helping children learn. He repeatedly conveyed his expectation that power struggles between "adult personalities" were destructive and not welcome. An instructional focus on cooperative learning was adopted for the school; four staff development workshops with follow-up activities were planned by the curriculum and instruction cadre. Packer noted that teachers began to affirm their commitments to their students and to their students' futures. The faculty requested and participated in training after the school year ended to learn to implement the "Quest" social skills

and responsibility curriculum.

Teachers recalled Packer's declarations calling an end to the power struggles. Tensions subsided, they reported, as transfers occurred and as they teamed up, usually in grade level pairs, to support each other's efforts to implement cooperative learning. Accelerated concepts, others believe, kept the faculty focused and allowed more faculty to participate in decision making. As a result, several teachers became more comfortable contributing their opinions and began to assume leadership roles in cadres and on the steering committee. Teachers felt Packer's support, his commitment to children and the accelerated vision. Those who did not support his push for curricular and instructional changes, do trust him. One said "Ed rarely asks me to do something he would not do". As the year came to an end resistors raised the question of whether Lincoln would continue as an accelerated school. The discussion was charged; quiet supporters had found their voices. Packer remembers his own words, "If we withdraw, that's an admission of failure and I want nothing to do with failure.... you'll have to find another principal". Consensus was to continue into year four. Unity of purpose was getting closer; the keeper of the vision was acting on his beliefs.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

How does a newly appointed principal lead a school's staff to refocus on its own vision? Carefully and gradually are the answers from Lincoln's experience. To build the cultural linkages recommended by Sashkin and Sashkin (1993) new principals need time to create a history with their faculties. To establish the quality relations recommended by Carnine and Duckworth (1987), time and history are necessary to build a foundation of trust and respect. These items were on Packer's agenda during his first two years at Lincoln. Packer's commitment to instructional leadership as it includes student and teacher development (Leithwood, 1990) was also a familiar theme to his staff,



but, not all of them genuinely shared his commitment. That became Packer's goal during the next year.

Assuming leadership in a school is rocky enough without the additional trauma Lincoln teachers felt as the principal who had led them into the innovation resigned. Packer did not know of the unrealistic promises his staff expected of acceleration. He had not helped set the vision. He did not know what was expected of a principal in an accelerated school. More important, he could not know how tenuous the teachers' commitment was to the process. Fortunately, his adaptability, flexibility, and beliefs in success sustained and strengthened his convictions. The mission may have been a new one to him, but the experience was not. He recently commented that his "job was to focus on a mission and not let anything else get in the way". This comment, however, was not about restructuring schools, but about the experience of being a Navy SEAL. It applies well to his leadership role at Lincoln.

Lincoln's efforts at implementing the processes to become an accelerated school affirm the guidelines and lessons others are learning. Chenoweth and Kushman (1993) describe the three month journey of three schools as they courted and explored the concepts of acceleration in order to decide if they would commit to the innovation. Lincoln did not take that important and intense journey. Meadows (1990) compares her experiences as an eager new principal poised to make changes when she charged ahead without and, later, with staff support, knowledge, and trust. During Packer's first year, teachers were recovering from a trauma and he was working to establish relationships with the teachers. Like, Meadows, Packer learned how much time this demanded.

Recommendations and advice are heard less often from teachers who experience these

changes. Lincoln's teachers believe all new faculty and staff must be introduced early and, preferably, during interviews to the concepts of acceleration. They believe new principals must quickly learn and build upon the strengths in the faculty. They believe new principals must assess the levels of commitment held by the central office and the school faculty to the central concepts of the innovation. They urge newcomers to the building to strive to understand early the process and the concepts of the innovation; that understanding is key to being able to keep the vision. Consistent help from trusted outside coaches and facilitators was useful to Lincoln teachers. Many hypothesized that if the teachers are committed and if the processes of acceleration are in place, then an administrative change should be a smooth transition. Those conditions were not in place as their new principal assumed leadership, but Packer would support their recommendations. His straight talk is this: "give up the power trip; trust and empower teachers; be an instructional leader; stay focused on the mission."

Others will find themselves in situations similar to Ed Packer's at Lincoln Accelerated School. From the inside perspective the principal's message includes (1) respect shared decision making and value the mechanics of the alternative governance structure, (2) become an integral part of the process including keeping the vision, (3) respect and use well empowerment, unity of purpose, and building on strengths. From the outside researcher's perspective, also critical are the quality of the principal's relationship with teachers, the principal's commitment to effective instructional programs, and the principal's concern for teacher and student development.

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